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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#) [RU](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: INTERIOR MINISTER SAYS RUSSIANS
RESPONSIBLE FOR RECENT SHOOTINGS

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Minister of Internal Affairs Merabishvili told the Ambassador January 22 that using night-vision goggles, the Georgians had seen Russian special forces with sniper rifles conducting operations across the administrative boundary lines in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (UNOMIG made the same observation January 23.) He urged the international community to understand why it was important for Georgian police officers to use armored vehicles while patrolling for their own protection. Merabishvili said that Georgia was doing everything possible to help restart gas supplies to Tskhinvali, but suggested that the gas would be used to heat barracks for Russian soldiers. According to Merabishvili, the Georgian Government is focused on ensuring water is available for irrigation this spring for farmers in the former "buffer zone," and described plans to give resettled IDP families small plots of land for gardens. Merabishvili downplayed reports of tensions between Abkhaz and Russian officials saying that they were working together and reports of robberies and petty crime were the same kinds of reports that had been coming from the Gali region for years. He took on board the Ambassador's warning that the Government should not undercut its progress on democracy by harassing opposition figures, and promised to look into any case of USG concern. End Summary.

Russian Sharpshooters on the de facto "border"

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador met Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili January 22; Deputy Minister Eke Zguladze and DCM sat in. The conversation began with the Ambassador noting the recent increase in shooting incidents along the administrative borders with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He expressed regret at the loss of life of several Georgian police officers. Merabishvili noted there were also a large number of police officers who had been wounded while serving along the administrative borders and in some ways, these cases were even more difficult, since the officers were often badly hurt and would suffer (along with their families) for years to come.

¶3. (C) When the Ambassador asked Merabishvili who he thought was to blame -- and what the reason for these shootings was -- Merabishvili answered immediately "the Russians," and specifically, Russian sharpshooters from the Spetznatz. He said that using night-vision goggles, they had observed Russian special forces from across the border on patrol with sniper rifles. (Embassy note. On January 23, UNOMIG reported a similar observation of Russian soldiers with sniper rifles patrolling the administrative boundary line with Abkhazia. End note.) According to Merabishvili, the holidays were now over and this kind of activity would naturally be expected to increase. He said that the Russians had two goals -- to kill police officers and to provoke the Georgians. Merabishvili complained that the international community's concerns about the Georgian decision to use armored vehicles along the administrative boundaries were

absurd. Why should international observers from EUMM ride in safety in armored vehicles and Georgian policemen be required to drive in unmarked vehicles just to distinguish them from the Europeans? The Ministry was under increasing public criticism -- and pressure -- to take care of their own police officers too, so Merabishvili was doing that. He was looking at Cobra armored vehicles which had a price tag was about Qat Cobra armored vehicles which had a price tag was about \$300,000 per vehicle. Deputy Minister Zguladze interjected that the NATO International Staff had been particularly critical of this plan -- and asked for USG help in supporting the Georgian position.

Gas for Tskhinvali and Helping IDPs

14. (C) Merabishvili confirmed that the Georgian Government was doing everything possible to help with the South Ossetian gas situation -- which he wryly noted was oddly being considered a humanitarian gesture even though he was confident that the gas would be used to heat the barracks of Russian soldiers stationed in Tskhinvali and elsewhere. He asked whether the USG and international community would be so quick to engage later this year when the South Ossetians cut off water for irrigation for Georgian farmers. According to Merabishvili, the Georgian Government had spent 10-15 million GEL on irrigation pumps at several "headwaters" sites in South Ossetia last year. Now they were trying to pump water from sources near Nikozy (located on a plateau above the city) on the Georgian side of the administrative border to get the necessary water for agriculture this spring.

15. (C) With regard to IDPs (Merabishvili and the Ministry have the internal Georgian Government lead in dealing with IDP resettlement), Merabishvili said that around February

15-20, there would be a lottery for land parcels for the new IDPs resettled along the military highway between Tbilisi and Gori. One exception would be the settlement closest to Tbilisi intended for "urban dwellers" who instead would be given some help in the form of jobs at microenterprises. The other IDPs would all receive a hectare of land and a package containing a variety of seeds, in order to plant gardens that would help supply each family. Merabishvili said that the land for the settlements had been chosen with the idea of individual garden plots, so that each family could walk to his/her plot of land.

Russians and Abkhaz Working Together

16. (C) Regarding the internal situation in Abkhazia, Merabishvili downplayed reports of tensions between Abkhaz and Russians. He said that the reports of robberies and petty crimes were the same kinds of reports that had been coming from the Gali region in Abkhazia for years. The real problem was that this was an extremely poor part of the country. De facto "president" Bagapsh would again be looking for ethnic Georgian support to win presidential elections (scheduled for sometime later this year), but that it wasn't critical for him to win. With regard to South Ossetia, Merabishvili said simply that this was a Russian military camp, and de facto "president" Kokoity was simply the chief distributor of humanitarian assistance -- which let him ensure an income for himself and his cronies. He said that the situation in Abkhazia was more complicated, but that Bagapsh and the Russians were definitely working together.

Need for Democratic Gains

17. (C) At the end of the meeting, the Ambassador noted the importance of democratic development in Georgia -- stating that policymakers in Washington were continuing to look for democratic gains and signs of a free and independent media. The Ambassador noted that he had heard multiple although unconfirmed reports from people who were opponents of the Government complain about Government harassment and event arrest (he cited the example of an MCC contractor who was imprisoned in Tbilisi for embezzling funds even though an internal MCC audit had found no irregularities -- reportedly,

the contractor had previously had contact with some opposition politicians). Merabishvili said that he wasn't aware of the specific case (although Deputy Minister Zguladze knew about it), but took the point. He said that the Ambassador should feel free to raise any cases like this with him and he would look into them.

TEFFT